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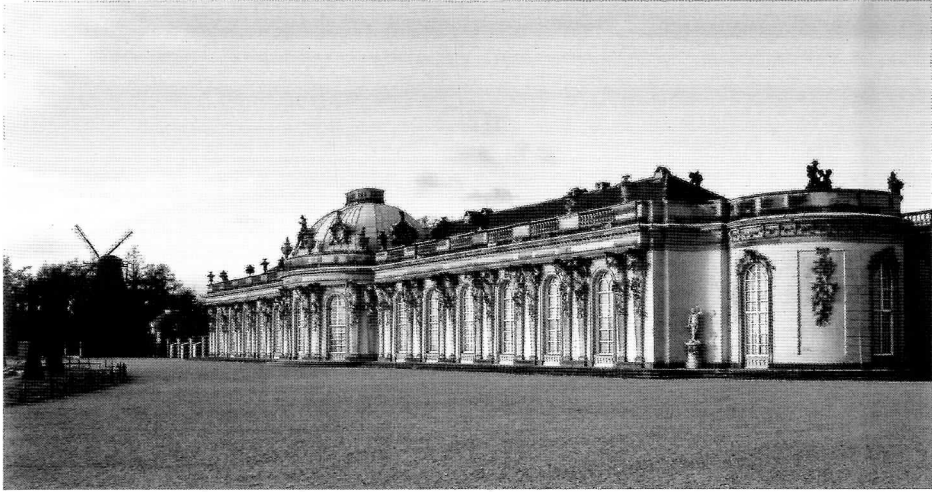
# SCHLOß SANSSOUCI (1743–1745)

*Jean-François Bédard*

A summer retreat more than a genuine palace, Schloß Sanssouci's unique layout owes as much to the idiosyncratic personality of its patron and designer, Frederick II, king of Prussia, as it does to the eighteenth-century French architectural type of the *maison de plaisance* (pleasure retreat). Prototypical enlightened ruler and keen Francophile, Frederick, known as Frederick the Great, combined military prowess with a discerning interest in philosophy, classical letters, and the arts. He not only corresponded with and hosted such preeminent minds of the time as Voltaire but was also himself an accomplished musician and composer, a notable art collector, even a skilled architect. At Sanssouci, he adapted the French model of the *pavillon à l'italienne*—a single-story garden pavilion—to an original program, part guesthouse, part intellectual retreat.

The building's story began in 1743, when Frederick decided to plant a vineyard on the southern slope of Wüste Hill, immediately to the north of his father's modest kitchen garden—named “Marly” in an ironic reference to Louis XIV's extravagant château. Two autographed sketches by Frederick dating from the first half of 1744<sup>1</sup> capture the essential lines of the king's concept. From a circular fountain flanked by parterres, semicircular flights of stairs lead to ascending terraces. At their summit stands a long pavilion with two double-loaded enfilades running east and west, each terminated by a circular room. An oval salon and a vestibule perpendicular to the main axis occupy the building's center. Brick service wings, set back from the château's south elevation (and in the building as realized, further shielded from the garden by *treillage* arbors), parallel the residential enfilades. To the north a double semicircular colonnade frames the entrance court.

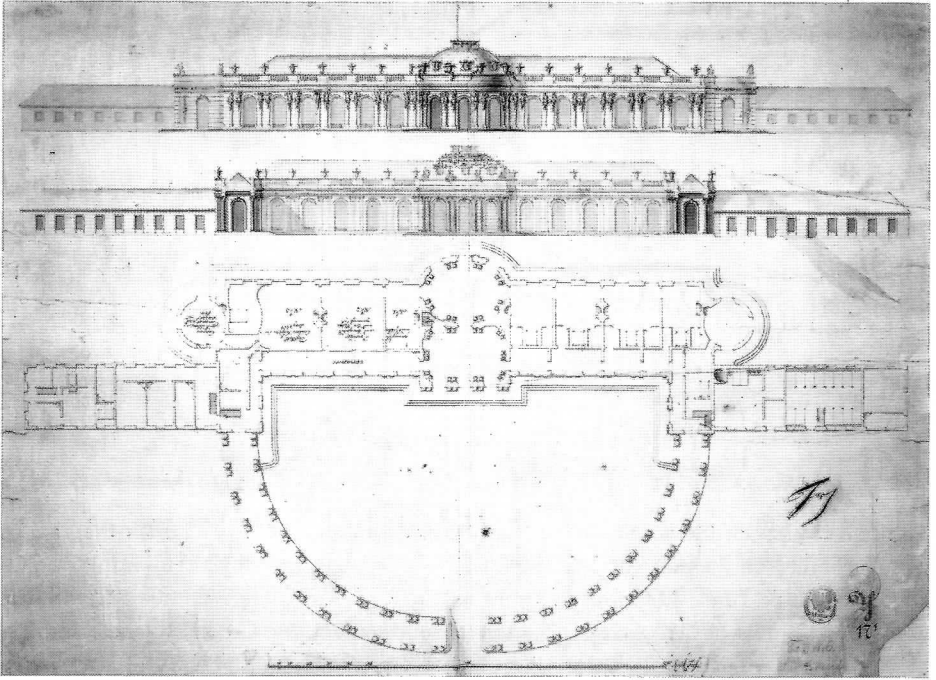
Frederick's architect Georg Wenzeslaus von Knobelsdorff developed his patron's summary sketches. A drawing from Knobelsdorff's office dating from 1744 to 1745<sup>2</sup> details the interior floorplan and the elevations (see Figure 2). Adhering closely to the king's drawings, Knobelsdorff delineated two double enfilades extending from the rectangular vestibule and oval salon (the so-called Marmorsaal, or Marble Hall). He also followed his patron's directions in locating the royal



**Figure 1** View of the south elevation of Schloß Sanssouci, with Frederick the Great's circular library on the east end. [GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>) or CC-BY-SA-3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons. © Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg / Credit: Roland Handrick.

apartment to the east. This consists of three rooms: an audience room, a music room, and a bedroom, with the royal bed in a large niche set off by a balustrade. A hidden door in the bedroom's north-east corner leads to the circular private cabinet that houses the king's library. On the west of the Marmorsaal, Knobelsdorff placed four visitor's bedrooms—the king had indicated that this portion of the building was “pour les étrangers”—each identically furnished with a bed *en niche* and a garde-robe. The west wing terminates in a circular cabinet, counterbalancing the king's library to the east. Knobelsdorff planned the secondary enfilades on the entrance court into a narrow gallery and service rooms. He also finalized the court façade, which combined tall arcades with paired Corinthian pilasters and engaged columns matching those of the forecourt colonnade. The king himself had insisted on this scheme: paired columns appear in Frederick's summary plans, along with the autograph notation “colonade canelée corintien [sic]” (“fluted Corinthian colonnade”).

Because of its one-story elevation, long, narrow plan, and pilastered and arcaded façade, Sanssouci has often been compared to the Grand Trianon at Versailles (1687–88) and the Palais-Bourbon in Paris (begun 1722). Yet it differs significantly from these French precedents. Unlike its Parisian counterpart, Sanssouci is not made up of hierarchically distributed sequences of apartments. Nor does it emulate the Palais-Bourbon's sophisticated planning, similar to what Jacques-François Blondel advocated in his influential 1737 treatise *De la Distribution des Maisons de*



**Figure 2** Office of Georg Wenzeslaus von Knobelsdorff (1699–1753), architect and draftsman. *Elevations and plan, Schloß Sanssouci, Potsdam, Germany. 1744–45.* Potsdam, Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg, Plankammer, GK II (1) 14. © Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg / Photographer: Roland Handrick. © Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg / Credit: Roland Handrick.

*Plaisance.* If Sanssouci's courtyard elevation does recall the scheme used at Trianon, the Prussian palace lacks the uniformity of Trianon's façades: on Sanssouci's garden front, Frederick and Knobelsdorff replaced the solemn Corinthian order with thirty-six terms that celebrate wine making and the harvest. Friedrich Christian Glume's cheerful figures transform Sanssouci into a festive temple to Bacchus. There, thanks to the god's ministrations, the king and his guests could enjoy their leisure pastimes truly "without care."

Sanssouci's decorators carried the lighthearted bacchanalian theme into the vestibule, where overdoor stucco reliefs by Georg Franz Ebenhecht and carved doors by Johann Christian Hoppenhaupt the Younger reprise the myth of Bacchus. Elsewhere, decorative schemes evoke nature and the arts. The vault of the Marmorsaal displays gilded military trophies and allegorical statues in stucco representing music, architecture, astronomy, painting, and sculpture. In the music room Ebenhecht and Johann Michael Merck implemented exuberant designs by Johann August Nahl the Elder.<sup>3</sup> Nahl framed mirrors and wall paintings—scenes from

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* by the French painter Antoine Pesne (1747)—with graceful gilded rococo ornament. Nahl's extraordinary grotesque ceiling for the same room features trellises covered in vines that terminate at the room's center in a gilded spider web. Putti hunting with hounds populate this fantastic landscape.<sup>4</sup> Artistic and classical literary themes resume in Frederick's private library. Here Johann Heinrich Hülsmann lined the walls with warm cedar paneling accented with allegories and attributes of the arts highlighted in gold leaf. Four brackets carry busts of Frederick's tutelary spirits: Apollo, Homer, Socrates, and Aeschylus. In the ceiling's center a gilded sunburst glows, a fitting symbol of Frederick's espousal of baroque kingship at its most resplendent—materialized on a grand scale in the Neues Palais built nearby 20 years later—and also of the Enlightenment ideal of the philosopher-king.

## Notes

1. Facsimiles kept at Potsdam, Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg [SPSG], Plankammer.
2. SPSG, Plankammer, Plansammlung Nr. 14.
3. Drawing for the west wall in Berlin, Kunstbibliothek, HdZ 5174.
4. Drawing at SPSG, Plansammlung Nr. 140.

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